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ABSTRACT

Research has clearly shown a persistent and significant relationship between self-concept and academic achievement. A child's self-concept affects not only academic achievement and school performance, but personal and social adjustment and career development as well. Parent attitudes in the family environment, teacher attitudes in the school environment, and peer attitudes in the community environment all work together to form the child's self-concept and to influence his achievement. There are several ways to improve the quality of these three environments. In a quality family environment, the family is deeply involved in learning, psychologically close, and oriented toward the neighborhood and community. The children are able to govern themselves and solve problems with little parental intervention. Family conversations are clear and spontaneous, generally constructive, and have little distortion in them. Parents hear and encourage expressions of differences of opinion. While family members gain increasing independence with age, both parents remain active participants in family affairs. The school environment can also be improved. The Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Multi-Cultural Institute has a 16-point program objectives list to enhance the school self-image of each child. In the community, school, or home, children learn success through contact with successful people, through identifying with excellence, through positive feedback and through warm and accepting relationships with others. (NB)

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The Dropout Dilemma: Parenting In A Preventive Mode*

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In the book Black Rage, psychiatrists William Grier and Price Cobbs note the connection between the Black Child's negative view of himself and his academic achievement. Citing a case study of a boy whose counselor advised him to abandon aspirations for college and "work with his hands," they observed that "all his life the boy had shown his parents evidence of his above-average intellectual gifts, but his performance in school was always mediocre and they found themselves treating him as if he were a dull child in need of coaching and tutoring. Children are responsive to the expectations of their environment. They read clearly both the conscious and the unconscious message."

The aroused interest in the plight of minority group students has served to focus our attention on an aspect of personality that is important in all children, regardless of their ethnic origins.

Self-esteem appears to be an important factor in learning. The overall research evidence clearly shows a persistent and significant relationship between the self-concept and academic achievement.

The research which has given the clearest picture to date of the antecedents of self-esteem is that reported by Stanley Coopersmith. In building a rationale for his study he writes:

> Experimental studies indicate that a person with low self-esteem is less capable of resisting pressures to conform and is less able to perceive threatening stimuli.

* A paper presented at The National Coalition of Title 1 Chapter 1 Parents, 13th Annual In-Service Training Conference, November 12 - 15, 1986, Bond Court Hotel, Cleveland, Ohio.

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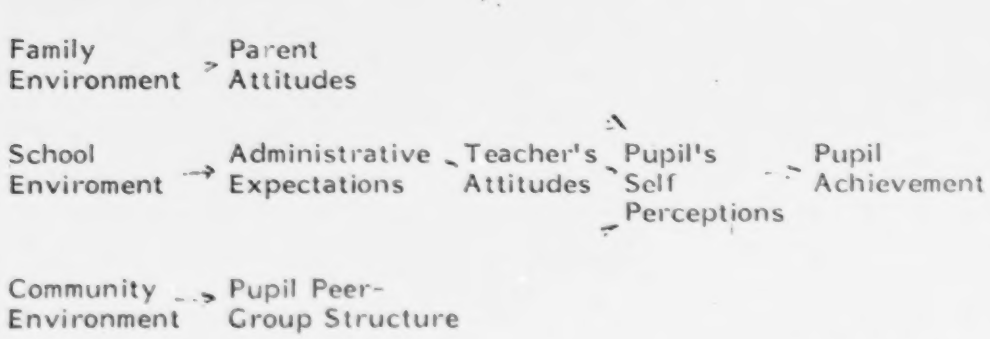
> They further indicate that a person with high self-esteem maintains a fairly constant image of his capabilities and of his distinctness as a person. Studies of creative persons show that they rank quite high in self-esteem. Presumably, belief in one's perceptions and convictions that one can force or impose order upon a segment of the universe is a basic prerequisite for major creativity. These persons with high self-esteem are also more likely to assume an active role in social groups and to express their views frequently and effectively. Less troubled by fears and ambivalence, less burdened by self-doubt and minor personality disturbances, the person with high self-esteem apparently moves more directly and realistically toward his personal goals.

Alvin F. Poussaint writes that in the development of the Black child's self-concept in white American society, the generalized other whose attitudes the Black child assumes and the looking glass into which he gazes both support the judgement that he is inferior because he is Black. The child learns these self-attitudes from racist representatives of white society. The child learns these self-attitudes from his Black family and peers who have been socialized to believe that they are sub-standard human beings. These attitudes are reinforced when performance in accordance with them is rewarded by the larger society.

By the time the child enters school, he has internalized a variety of experiences and appraisals which are reflected in his perceptions, ideas, and feelings about himself and the way others see him. Some children have developed a positive self-concept - they view themselves as generally adequate, worthy, and accepted. Many, however ... have developed a negative self-concept, or they meet the opportunities presented at school with resistance, reluctance, or apathy. They are afraid to involve themselves in new learnings, which they sense may confirm their feelings of inadequacy and will only bring them further disapproval.

And a child's self-concept is a factor affecting more than his performance in school: it is a factor in personal social adjustment and career development as well.



Model 1: The Educative Process

Model 1 provides a better understanding of the "educative process"- the relationship between academic achievement to environmental principles. Students attitudes toward themselves, toward achievement and toward their environment "show the strongest relationship to achievement at all school levels."

Improving the Quality of the Family Environment

Many successful parents in the business and professional world have suffered heartache and deep remorse because they have reared an unhappy, maladjusted child. There can be no doubt that parents have a reciprocal need for the school despite the fact that many may not recognize it.

The schools need strong, stable, educationally oriented families. From time to time, a distinguished family is recognized for the outstanding accomplishments of all members. Some families seem to have unusual success and every child seems to be highly motivated, well adjusted, and distinguished insofar as accomplishments are concerned. What are the characteristics of these unusual families? What do parents do and what practices should they follow to encourage in the home the behavior that will lead to these unusual accomplishments?

There are no simple answers and we must beware of overly simplified generalizations. But there are some fundamental guidelines that will enhance the probability of success. Following are ten such guidelines that might be helpful to parents interested in evaluating and improving the quality of family life. In discussing these guidelines, it should be emphasized that not many families will meet all of the standards outlined below, but concepts should be helpful to parents.

1. The family is deeply involved in learning. This involbement includes continuous conversation about learning and about topics that stimulate the mind and generate an overall desire to acquire knowledge and to be inteliectually competent. Before, during and after school, the children from such families are oriented toward intellectual activity. There is strong encouragement and stimulation towards thinking and toward utilizing the mind in seeking lofty goals and in perpetuating high ideals.

2. The family is psychologically close. There is an atmosphere in the home of warmth and caring for each other. The members of the family identify as a family unit. This psychological closeness is usually created by a large number of activities in which the entire family participates. This lifestyle is contrasted with many aspects of modern day family life where each member goes his own way and sees the home only as a place for sleeping and eating. The family members have a genuine regard for each other and a feeling of responsibility toward the family and toward helping all other family members to reach goals and to attain a feeling of fulfillment.

3. The family members are oriented twoard the neighborhood and community. They may make contributions to others less forunate than they themselves. The family members give of themselves when no particular reward is expected. In addition to meeting their own needs as individual family members, they are actively involved in helping others and in participating in community activities that tend to lift up the less fortunate among them.

4. The children in the family largely govern themselves and settle problems among themselves with very little parental intervention. Personality conflicts are few in such families. Talking and the exchange of ideas among

brothers and sisters seem to help this self-governance characteristic. Rare is the case where a dispute has to be arbitrated by the father or the mother.

5. The conversation among family members is quite clear and spontaneous. The family members speak freely and have a sense of openness and a lack of tension in conversation. The children grow up in a family atmosphere where clear expression and spontaneous relating of one's thoughts and feeling are encouraged. Communication among family members is, of course, very important. The achieving family encourages this free expression and establishes a pattern of living and a sense of emotional interrelatedness that makes this free expression easily attained.

6. The conversation is generally constructive. Most of the comments made by family members to each other are positive. This all reflects a certain maturity and understanding among family members. There is a sense of duty and willingness to contribute toward a constructive emotional climate in the home. Mutual encouragement is offered to others within the family. Even criticism is framed in positive ways. The conversation is oriented toward placing the needs and the well-being of the other person very high in the hierarchy of values. This attitude offers a considerable amount of reinforcement for good behavior and for positive thinking in the home.

7. There is very little distortion in the conversation. Family members tend to tell things as they are. They don't create problems for each other more than they need to or exaggerate them for the sake of emphasis. The family members tend to be modest and ego-seeking is low key. This approach provides healthy reality therapy on a continuous basis for children growing up.

8. The parents hear differences of opinion and behave toward children in a way that will encourage expressions of difference. Through this listening to differences able to detect problems as they develop from con versation. This openness to hear differences is encouraged by keeping distortion of differing views to a minimum, and by letting children know that parental egos need no feeding because the level of maturity is beyond this.

9. The life history of family members during the growing time is one of increasing independence with age. There is a gradual taking on of more work, added responsiblity, and independent decision-making opportunities. Each member of the family feels it is natural for those older and more mature to have more privileges and also more responsibilites. This gradual transition toward independence is very important and is a characteristic of family life that should be encouraged.

10. Both the father and the mother are very active participants in family affairs. One of the parents will act as the hearing examiner on serious difficulties. Both parents have a rapport with all members of the family that communicates interest, strong support, and an active orientation toward the family as being of central importance in their lives. The parents are a source of stability and strength to the family members. As heads of the family, they provide a sense of support, understanding, and encouragement. Most of the decisions in the home are cooperative ones which the parents share extensively before decisions are made. This helps to build family identity and family concern for working together in a way that will help ensure the wisdom of major decisions made on behalf of the entire family.

There is no doubt that most parents and all of our schools would like to see family ties, commitments, and life styles that will enhance the likelihood of success. The emotional relationships and the psychological climate can be attained in most homes, for they are simply common sense ideas in applying concepts that are well known.

A recent article in "Caring," a publication by the National Committee for the Prevention of Child Abuse, raised the question, "What is emotional abuse?" The answer to this question is an area of concern to many educators: and, the elusiveness of the answer is a source of frustration for many educators.

To a greater degree than any other type of child abuse or neglect, emotional maltreatment resists the provision of clear-cut guidelines and must be examined on a case-by-case basis. It is seldom the result of a single act, but rather the result of negative child-parent interactions over an extended period of time.

Here are two definitions of emotional neglect for your consideration. "Inability of meaningful adults to provide necessary nurturance, stimulation, encouragement, and protection to the child at various stages of development which inhibits the child's optimal development." The other definition is "Emotional neglect is a result of subtle or blantant acts of omission or co-mission experienced by the child which causes handicapping stress in the child and is manifested in patterns of inappropriate behavior." Both of these definitions recognize that the family is the causative agent and that there is a resulting impact on the child's ability to function.

In the "Caring" article, it stated that, "...emotional abuse is the willful destruction or significant impairment of a child's competence." The focal point for defining emotional abuse leads to four central themes:

1. Penalizing a child for positive, normal behavior such as smiling, mobility, exploration, talking, and manipulation of objects is emotional abuse.
2. Discouraging parent and infant attachment is emotional abuse.
3. Penalizing a child for showing signs of positive self-esteem is emotional abuse.
4. Penalizing the child for using interpersonal skills needed for adequate performance in non-family situations such as schools and peer groups in emotional abuse.

The strong relationship between parental behavior and action makes it important that parents be consistent in providing empathy, love, acceptance and self-worth. Parents should provide opportunities and rewards for learning and mastering of new skills. Appropriate behavioral models which sets moral limits, guidance and consequences for behavior will help to ensure the needed emotional stability necessary in functioning in a complex world.

Improving the Quality of the School Environment

For parents and educators who are looking for criteria in measuring schools, the following ten ingredients for a good school should fit the bill:

1. A strong principal who gets things done, sets a friendly tone in the school but insists "we're here to learn" and makes sure no one forgets it for a minute.

2. A good principal is the "single most critical element" of a successful school .
3. Parents who insist on setting some of the priorities for subjects taught at school, volunteer in classrooms and help their children with homework.
4. A staff of teachers who are experienced, but not "burned out" by the rigors of their job. Teachers must expect children to succeed.
5. A good, quiet school where students are not distracted everyday by the sounds of students fighting in the halls.
6. A learning program which stresses basic reading, writing and arithmetic and still lively enough to keep from boring children.
7. Where the school is like a family. Nothing is done without input from everyone - parents, faculty and administrators.
8. The daily student absentee rate is low. Where parents feel that school attendance on a daily basis is important.
9. Teachers who meet frequently to talk about improving things -- to share in the school's success.
10. Where parents are required to come to school to discuss academic or behavioral problems of their children.

The parents, community citizens, teachers and the administration of the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Multi-Cultural Institute have developed a 16-Point Program Objectives that they live by in an attempt to enhance the school - self image of each child. Please consider the following school-wide objectives.

1. Each child will succeed.
2. Each child is expected to be functioning on or above the grade in which he is in.
3. The need for remediation is to be prevented; it is not a technique to be relied upon to overcome failure.
4. Reading achievement is basic to success.
5. The development of the child's personality is essential to his success in school.

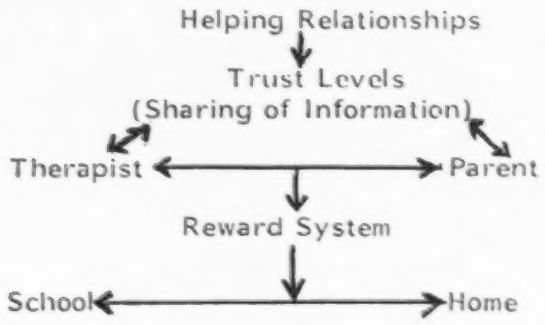
6. There must be a real respect for and devotion to the integrity of each child.
7. The atmosphere of the school must be one that engenders mutual love and concern among all those who live there.
8. The administration of the school must give to every teacher the respect for her professional status and human dignity.
9. Teachers must be given the freedom and opportunity for professional growth.
10. The administration and teaching staff of the school must adhere to an open-door policy which demonstrates the respect for parents as partners in the educational process.
11. Our children are entitled to no less than the wealthiest private schools can give to its children.
12. A school in which there is failure is a failing school. There can be no built-in excuses for the failure of a child.
13. We know of no bounds that set limits to the potential of each child.
14. Every human being in the school must feel the pride in being part of a successful venture in living and learning.
15. Practice in the profession of education commits one to be responsible and accountable for the molding of human lives. The profession cannot tolerate inferiority or even mediocrity. A committment to excellence is the only measure.
16. Teachers must be willing to serve as an advocate when a child's rights are endangered, even at the risk of personal advancement.

Improving the Quality of the Community Environment

Many Black children have gained direction and purpose by identifying with Blacks in important positions and with the Black cause. The school-related behavior of children at the King Institute has changed markedly over the past several years as a result of our name change. Children have an opportunity to identify with excellence, fair play, personal development and chances of performing in ways that will result in positive feedback and increased chances of developing a positive self-concept.

The ways to success - in society, at school, on the job -- are learned through contact with successful people. Children from troubled backgrounds lack continued and close contact with success models. They often feel that they are destined to be like the people around them or that is "selling out" not to be. They often sense rejection by outsiders.

Internal and external reward systems must be developed on an ever increasing basis. A child's negative concept of himself can be changed. He must experience warm and accepting relationships with others and if he is relatively free from anxiety resulting from the threat of belittlement. Fortunately (or unfortunately), the teacher is in almost complete control of these conditions in the classroom. The magnitude of the school's role in shaping a child's self-concept cannot be over-emphasized. The school is the second most important factor (after the home) in the development of the individual's self-concept.



Model 2: Self Enhancement Education

William H. Grier and Price M. Cobbs, two eminent Black psychiatrists at the San Francisco Medical Hospital, writing in The Jesus Bag:

> "It is true the Black patients have had little reason to trust healers - the result is suspiciousness a black norm of distrust and circumspection which is in fact not only appropriate but life-preserving and life sustaining.
>
> The therapist must therefore be prepared for a period in which his words. "I am not as the others who injure you," are measured against his acts. Such testing is prudent, and wise, and adaptive, and speaks well for the survival instincts of the patient."

The patients are the children and youth. The therapist is you and I or any individual engaged in a helping relationship with the young. Before values, knowledge or anything else can be transmitted -- you must develop a trust relationship you must be believeable.

In his famous Zion Hill speech, entitled The Dilemma and the Challenge, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. summarizes this question by stating, "In spite of the fact that we have been slaves for 240 years, the demands of history require that we be just as productive, just as resourceful, just as responsible as the people who have never experienced those disadvantages. We must develop and maintain a sense of dignity and self-respect. We must not allow anything or any force to make us feel that we do not count. We must believe in our souls that we are somebody, that we are significant and worthful. We must walk the streets of life everyday with this sense of dignity and this sense of somebodiness."

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